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Who Lost Mount Alto?

WASHINGTON

In the new Soviet Embassy compound atop the District of Columbia's Mount Alto, 350 feet above sea level, laser-beam listening devices are now being installed by Soviet technicians. They have a clear line of sight to the White House and the Capitol. Aimed at windowpanes, the superbugs will be able to pick up conversations in all the rooms with north-facing windows.

During the Nixon Administration, our National Security Agency — so secret that its initials were said to stand for "No Such Agency" — joined with the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. in objecting, in writing, to the assignment of Mount Alto to the Russians. Somebody — nobody will now say who — overrode those objections. As a result, the Russians have a huge advantage in electronic espionage.

Washington is beginning to get the feeling long held by New Yorkers, surveyed from a tower in Riverdale: 70 percent of all local telephone conversations in the capital will be wide open to Mount Alto's Big Ear.

What are we doing about it? Mr. Reagan has signed a National Security Decision Directive ordering millions of "secure" phones with underground lines, at huge expense, for Government officials and defense contractors. That costly scrambling will be quickly overcome; moreover, the vast majority of private calls in our capital, including those that make the Russians such wizards in commodity trading, would go completely undefended in a country whose citizens are supposedly to be protected from "unreasonable searches."

The way to stop this rape of our privacy is to inform the Soviet Union that such espionage is against our law

State and C.I.A. are soft on secrets

and to make them stop it.

Ah, no, say some of our spooks. You see, we do the same thing over there, albeit from a much less advantageous spot. If we close down their listening, they'll close down ours; since theirs is a closed society, we learn a lot more about them than they do about us.

I wonder about that conventional wisdom. Years ago, when we were secretly bugging their limousine transmissions, we knew which marshal was seeing which prima ballerina, causing much cackling at Langley. But that edge is gone; both sides know of the other's surveillance; has any Team B been assigned to ask if we are really getting more relevant data than we are losing? Is the demeaning trade necessary?

New York Senator Daniel P. Moynihan has put forward the Foreign Surveillance Protection Act to slam the door, but it is opposed by the Administration. That is not the only attempt to stop known Russian spying that Mr. Reagan resists. In the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, over 200 Russian nationals make the beds, serve the food and spy. (Not one American works for the Soviet Embassy in Washington.) The American Ambassador in Moscow knows his driver is a K.G.B. colonel.

Last March, we learned (probably from the Brits, who had a good K.G.B. source) that the typewriters in our

Moscow embassy were transmitting everything written to the White House directly to the Kremlin. Of course, Russians inside our embassy serviced these machines. And the carcinogenic "spy dust" found throughout the embassy, probably nitrophenylpentadiene, was spread by Soviet nationals to facilitate surveillance.

Representative Jim Courter offers a bill requiring replacement of all Soviet citizens by Americans in our Moscow embassy within a year. The State Department response: How about half? That would mean only the best K.G.B. personnel would continue to make the beds. Under Congressional pressure, State says the central U.S. facility there will be free of Russians, but that the compound will have drivers and others who are not Americans.

Why? State is fearful that the Americans will be seduced and turned into spies, that they won't be as effective in getting people on the phone, that they may get in trouble or accidents. Apparently it would rather have full-time K.G.B. agents on the premises than U.S. citizens, because — get this — such close contact keeps our diplomats security-conscious, and enables them to send messages by talking to the chandeliers. State also moans about how hard it is to get drivers and domestic servants to work over there, but that's malarkey — let the department advertise.

The Russians are regularly penetrating our Moscow embassy and increasingly penetrating our telephone and office conversations in Washington, and this presumably hard-line Administration is doing nothing about it. If William Casey and George Shultz have gone so soft on secrets, our secrets, the time is overdue for rigorous Congressional oversight. □